

Pathways for the United States and Vietnam to Establish a Strategic Partnership by 2020

By Thi Bich Tran (Bella)

The United States and Vietnam, former enemies, have transformed relations into a partnership since rapprochement in 1995. Moving away from their twentieth-century enmity, the two sides reached a breakthrough in relations with the establishment of a comprehensive partnership in 2013. A further step was taken in 2017 when a joint statement was issued for enhancing the comprehensive partnership. The next step should be establishing a strategic partnership by 2020.

The foundation of the relationship between the United States and Vietnam comprises more than strategic considerations. It is deeply emotional, as people from both sides have worked together to address war legacies — including the search for personnel missing in action — long before the restoration of the diplomatic relations. Former veterans of the Vietnam War such as the late Senator John McCain — who was a prisoner of war in Vietnam for five years — have played an important role in the two countries' reconciliation process and subsequent friendship.

A common concern about China's aggressiveness in the South China Sea has further facilitated the growth of U.S.-Vietnam relations. Washington and Hanoi share deep concern about Beijing's land reclamation and the militarization of artificial islands. For Vietnam, China's expansive claim has directly challenged its sovereignty and national interests. For the United States, China's actions in the South China Sea not only challenge freedom of navigation — on which the economies of the United States and its Indo-Pacific allies largely depend — but also demonstrate China as a "revisionist power." Hanoi needs external help to enhance its maritime capability, and helping Vietnam is in the strategic and economic interests of the United States. Therefore, the two sides have come together at quick pace.

The 2013 joint statement on the establishment of the United States-Vietnam comprehensive partnership and the 2017 joint statement for enhancing the comprehensive partnership clearly reflect the development of bilateral relations. Among the nine areas of cooperation, bilateral defense and security cooperation is worth noting. In the 2013 statement, defense and security cooperation ranks number seven (in written order) with a focus on search-and-rescue activities and non-traditional security matters. In the 2017 joint statement, defense and security cooperation moves up to number three in the list with a focus on maritime security.

Despite all the progress made in bilateral relations, President Trump's America First foreign policy has raised questions about the trajectory of the U.S.-Vietnamese comprehensive partnership. On his first day in office, the president withdrew the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), of which Vietnam was a member. The Trump administration also prioritizes fair and reciprocal trade, and Vietnam runs a significant trade surplus with the United States. Given these changes on the part of Washington, will the United States continue to pay attention to the South China Sea disputes and provide support and assistance to Vietnam?

Thi Bich Tran,
Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington explains that "President Trump's America First foreign policy has raised questions about the trajectory of the U.S.-Vietnamese comprehensive partnership."

Despite difficulties on the trade side of bilateral relations, other aspects of United States-Vietnam cooperation have continued under the Trump administration. The Department of State has consistently provided funding for post-war demining in Vietnam. The Department of Defense's decision to join the remediation of Agent Orange (dioxin) in 2019 was an important development, providing more funding for Vietnam. The Maritime Security Initiative (MSI), which aims to help Southeast Asian countries — including Vietnam — strengthen their maritime domain awareness capabilities, remains intact. Politically, the two countries have frequent meetings and delegation exchanges. The United States has even sent an aircraft carrier to visit Vietnam—the first time since the end of the Vietnam War.

The Vietnamese government has indicated that a strategic partnership with Washington is its objective. If so, what are the hindrances in upgrading the partnership to a strategic level? Politically, Vietnam's Communist Party (VCP) fears regime change. Hanoi therefore hopes to get support and assistance from external powers without interference in its internal affairs. However, while Washington wants to help Hanoi improve its maritime capability, it also puts pressure on the latter's human rights conditions. Since the Obama administration committed to conclude the TPP in its joint statement with Hanoi, the Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the agreement has negatively affected Vietnam's trust in the United States. It will also be difficult to achieve a strategic partnership amidst US pressure on trade. Meanwhile, defense and security cooperation — despite noticeable improvements — has not grown as fast as U.S. expectations, but at a pace comfortable to Vietnam. One of the main reasons for Hanoi's cautions is that it does not want to alienate China, with which it shares a long border, complicated history, and similar political ideology. Moreover, the fact that Vietnam does not have enough personnel who speak English to conduct joint exercises and training with their American counterparts has proven to be a capacity problem in enhancing bilateral defense cooperation.

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United States-Vietnam relations might attain a strategic-level status if the two sides can address the problems above. Washington has committed to respecting Hanoi's political system and should continue this commitment. Despite the call from other countries, due to domestic political constraints, the United States is unlikely to rejoin the TPP (now called the Comprehensive Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership) in the near future. Thus, increasing American investment to Vietnam should be the focus of bilateral economic ties. Vietnam might benefit from the U.S.-China trade war as some U.S. as well as Chinese businesses are considering relocating to Vietnam. However, one of the main U.S. concerns is Vietnam's cyber law, which requires the stationing of internet servers on Vietnam's soil. Thus, Vietnam should consider changing the law to attract foreign investment. To deepen defense ties, Vietnam should allow more U.S. military ships to visit and participate in joint exercises. The United States also should offer more training to Vietnamese military personnel.

The trajectory of the United States-Vietnam partnership largely depends on the U.S. approach in deepening the relationship, China's actions in the South China Sea, and Vietnam's improvement of its human rights record. However, it is widely said that the Trump administration is downplaying the promotion of democracy and human rights in its foreign policy. Moreover, Hanoi's position in international affairs will be significantly enhanced in 2020. On June 7th, 2019 Vietnam was selected as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council to serve during the 2020-2021 term. Hanoi will also be ASEAN's chair during the same year. In addition, 2020 is the 25th anniversary of the normalization of the U.S.-Vietnam relations. These factors might make it an auspicious year to upgrade U.S.-Vietnam bilateral ties to a strategic partnership to help shape the Asia-Pacific regional order.

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